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Soviet Troops May Be Massing for Move Into Poland, Intelligence Analysts Fear

By William Beecher
The Boston Globe

Western intelligence has picked up signs over the last few days of unusual military activity in East Germany and the Soviet Union which could presage either an invasion of Poland or a significant show of force for intimidation purposes.

"It's clearly Poland-oriented," one well-placed American source declared. "But it'll take a few days to a week to determine its scale and pace. As to Soviet intentions, that may take a little longer to ascertain."

The activity is said to include preparations to move by some of the 20 divisions in the Western military districts of Russia and among their 20 divisions in East Germany. In addition, the beginning of a mobilization of reservists in the Soviet Union also has been spotted.

Moscow is pledged to notify the Western alliance well in advance of any intended maneuvers by as many as 25,000 men or about two divisions. There has been no notification.

Senior U.S. analysts who before this new information thought Moscow would probably wait several months to see whether the new Polish leadership could establish effective control over the political-economic currents in their country, now are expressing serious doubts. They cite three new factors believed to be worrying the Kremlin:

- Representatives of the independent trade union movement decided this week to attempt to set up a national confederation to deal directly on labor demands with the government. If that effort succeeds, it would represent a serious challenge to Communist Party rule in Poland and could open the way to political pluralism.

- Lech Walesa, who has become somewhat of a national hero for leading the successful strike at the Gdansk shipyards, is expected soon to be invited to visit the Pope in Rome. "Can you imagine how Walesa, once blessed by the Polish Pope, will be anything but the most important political leader in his country?" one official asked.

- The Russians are said to be concerned that an internal movement to purge the Polish Communist Party on charges of corruption is actually a cover for an effort by nationalistic, reform-minded Poles to oust conformist pro-Russian officials.

"There is a long list of arguments for not going in," one official said. "But a powerful case can now be made for intervention this fall."

"If the Russians move now they'll take their lumps, in Poland and outside. But it can be argued that if they wait several months they simply might not be able to turn things around."

In 1968, the Soviets mobilized a force of about 500,000 men on the borders of Czechoslovakia as they negotiated with Czech leaders on the acceptable limits to political liberalization. When the Czechs exceeded those limits the Russians invaded.

"Obviously it would be preferable from a Soviet point of view to remind the Poles of their vulnerability by massing on the border but not moving in," one official said. "Such a show of force would not be lost elsewhere in Eastern Europe, where the winds of restlessness are blowing."

Unlike Czechoslovakia, however, most American analysts believe both the Polish army and the people would fight a Soviet invasion. The Poles have 15 army divisions with fairly modern tanks and artillery.

Thus, conservative Soviet military planners would doubtless insist on adequate force to quickly stamp out resistance.

There are only two Soviet divisions in Poland. But analysts say they could move up to five divisions from East Germany without seriously weakening that front, push in 20 divisions from the Soviet Union and another three or four Soviet divisions from Czechoslovakia.

In addition to those 30 or so divisions, the Russians might want to add some Bulgarian and Czech units to demonstrate Warsaw Pact solidarity, some U.S. planners suggest.

"They have carefully, from the very first, established that so-called anti-Socialist forces were to blame for the labor trouble," one official said. "Indeed, even some of our own labor unions bragged about sending in money. Thus a case has been established for moving in to 'protect the Socialist revolution.'"

American planners say it would take at least two weeks for the Russians to gear up for a massive military effort. Besides fleshing out the 20 forward divisions in the western Soviet Union, they would also have to call up reservists for back up divisions.

In addition, they would have to divert thousands of trucks from the harvest and non-military activities to haul ammunition, weapons and spare parts forward. Such activities cannot be hidden.

"Unlike Afghanistan, where there were a lot of unknowns, the Russians have had Poland wired for 30 years," one analyst noted. "They know every road, every bridge, the presumed political reliability of every Polish officer down to company level. But given the history and temperament of the Poles, especially if some of their countrymen were falling to Russian bullets, they can't be sure the Polish army won't fight them bitterly."

"That means the probability of a bloody battle and a long, costly occupation. In the outside world, the political price could be even higher. But if they believe the Communist empire is in danger of starting to unravel in Poland, they have no choice."